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- Where there is monopoly power, regulatory mechanisms must remain.
- User pays when new technology is deployed
- Cost assignment should recognise cost causation (in the US, the long distance providers must pay the local companies access charges and the argument is about what are fair access charges which properly compensate local companies).
- Guarantee of privacy as a paramount concern.

McEldowney spoke of the need for consumer advocacy to be adequately funded. In California, a court award against the local Bell company had funded a range of consumer advocacy/education groups.

A number of other speakers at the conference gave an Australian perspective which picked up concerns shared with US consumers.

Garth Nowland-Foreman of the Australian Council of Social Service described focus group research ACOSS has done on the unemployed and their need for a phone. A key finding is that the telephone is a lifeline for the unemployed, one of the most vital tools for the unemployed in seeking and finding work

One of the important ways people find work is through informal contacts. Yet people without a telephone largely use the telephone for more formal contacts - with employers and services for example - rather than for maintaining informal links as a source of both support and possible work. The research also found that the CES in some cases did not contact those without a telephone about jobs. Unemployed people who have a phone are often retaining the service at great cost.

Phil Harper of the Australian Association for the Deaf spoke of the needs of deaf/speech impaired people for telephone typewriters (TTYs). One of the biggest hurdles is that the definition of the standard telephone service is not seen as including the TTY. Another major problem is the cost of using the TTY, since conversations can take from six to eight times longer.

Dr Peter White of La Trobe University emphasised the need for both information and regulation for consumers. As a test, he went into both carriers and one supplier asking for a mobile handset for his elderly mother who wanted an inexpensive handset which would last. Only one carrier told him, without prompting, that the analogue handset could not be used after the switch to digital in 2000, and offered an inexpensive handset.

White cited this as a case for AUSTEL to use its regulatory powers and, if necessary, amend legislation to set appropriate standards and ensure proper consumer information.

Social researcher Eva Cox summarised the paper 'Weaving Community Links' prepared by her consultancy (see CU 90) and said that the telephone is not merely a poverty issue or issue for sectoral interests. The larger issue is making sure people can operate in a complex, dispersed community. The discussion should not be about consumers as markets but about citizens' right to a service. Using the

term 'consumers' assumes people have access to perfect information in a perfect market.

The CTN seminar suggests that the 1997 review of telecommunications, and indeed any other reviews in the area, need to consider who benefits from competition, and how public needs can be ascertained and met in a changing environment where the market place will not meet those needs. □

Holly Raiche

## The USO Doesn't Deliver

**People with hearing and speech disabilities and deaf people recently lodged a complaint under the new Federal Disability Discrimination Act against Telecom, Optus, Vodafone and the Federal Government for denying access to the telephone.**

The universal service obligation in the Telecommunications Act promised all Australians reasonable access to a standard telephone service. But without telephone typewriters (TTYs) and a TTY relay service, TTY users cannot communicate with hearing Australians.

The 1992 Federal Budget allocated money for a 12 month feasibility study to establish a national TTY relay service. Eighteen months later, the promised relay service is not in place.

'How much longer will our lives have to be put on hold or in danger before the Government delivers on its promise to deliver social justice to Deaf Australians?' asked Phil Harper from the Australian Association of the Deaf. Christopher Newell from Disabled Peoples' International adds that 'despite the government's promises, competition in telecommunications has brought no benefits to people with hearing and speech disabilities who need to communicate via text rather than voice'.

It will now be up to Disability Commissioner Elizabeth Hastings to conciliate the complaint - and Government to ensure its promise to all Australians is kept.

